# On the Structural Richness of Art Historical Discourse — Observations on Images

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**When the rotulus**



was cut into pages, forming the codex,



content could be accessed and addressed immediately. With print

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[1] http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/da/Joshua_Roll.jpg

[2] http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/7f/Family-bible.jpg

big numbers of copies became possible, getting knowledge out of cloisters
and castles. After Gutenberg's invention production of knowledge exploded,
identical copies of the same text made referencing unique and compatible
world wide. From all this art history as a scholarly practice profited as
well. And Gutenberg's invention did wonders on images, too. Aby Warburg, in
his very special variant of research on visual artworks, called books "the
new more agile image vehicles" which the antique gods, that he himself fol-
lowed so intensely within his far fetching studies, which the antique gods
rode so easily, disguised as pagan others throughout Europe.[4]
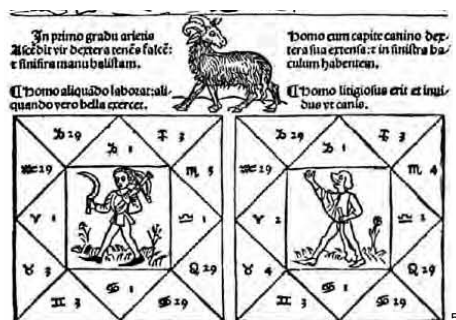


The internet, arriving at today's technical environment and infrastructure
for all scholarship, brought all this to just another level. Adressing is
the core of it, every single packet that is switched through the networks
has to have one, massive dissemination of arbitrary goods to everybody on
line brought the effects of print with moveble type to new heights. Refe-
rencing is the very operation in the World Wide Web.

The internet is a much better image vehicle than the book. W. J. T. Mit-
chell calls the mobility of the image the most important feature of its
digitisation.[6] And he is obviously right, since the digitisation optimised

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[3] http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/f8/Printer_in_1568-ce.png
[4] Warburg, Aby: Italienische Kunst und internationale Astrologie im Palazzo Schifa-
noja zu Ferrara. in: Wuttke, Dieter (Hrsg.): Ausgewählte Schriften und Würdigungen.
Baden-Baden: Valentin Koerner, 1980, S. 173-198. S. 180.
[5] Aries-Dekane aus dem Aatrolabiun Magnum des Pietro d'Albano. 1488. Aus Warburg a.
a. O. S. 183.
[6] Mitchell, W. J. T.: Realismus im digitalen Bild. in: Belting, Hans (Hrsg.): Bild-
erfragen. München: Fink Verlag, 2007, S. 237-255.


http://www2.leuphana.de/meta-image/Anleitungen.html

what was possible already in print: the movement of images in their ve-
hicles, up to stunning results as in the Google Art Project, but did not
solve what was hard in books as well: the adressing of the gaze, the loca-
lisation operations during the process of observation on images. Images
normally are still addressed as monolithic unities. Pointing is hard to do.

Books do it like this
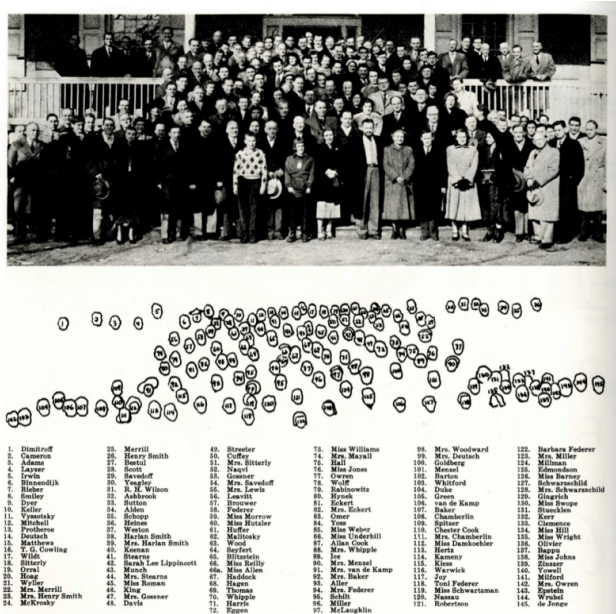


and Aby Warburg is said to have done it with wooden thread on his Mnemosy-
nae plates
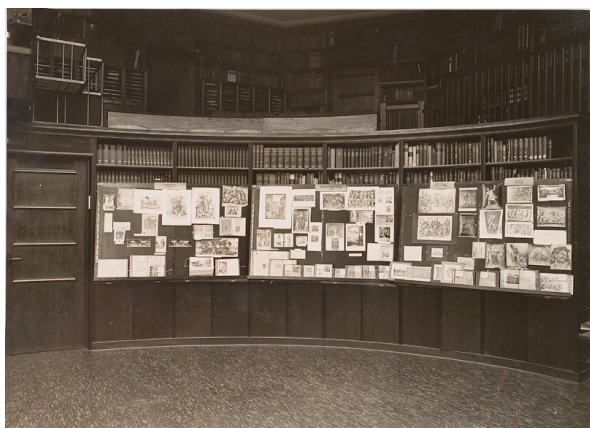


or with something like a stick while projecting at presentations. He could
not do this in the printed versions we have of his famous talks.

While studying his Schifanoia paper

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[7] Tufte, Edward R.: Visual Explanations: Images and Quantities, Evidence and Narra-
tive. Cheshire: Graphics Press, 2003. S. 100.
[8] Aby Warburg, Lesesaal, Kunstwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg, Hamburg während
der Ausstellung Ovid, 1927, © Warburg Institute Archive, London, Foto: Warburg In-
stitute.

http://www2.leuphana.de/meta-image/Anleitungen.html

[1912 / 1922]

A. WARBURG.

ITALIENISCHE KUNST UND INTERNAZIONALE ASTROLOGIE
IM PALAZZO SCHIFANOJA ZU FERRARA.*(¹)

Die römische Formenwelt der italienischen Hochrenaissance verkündet uns Kunsthistorikern den endlich geglückten Befreiungsversuch des künstlerischen Genies von mittelalterlicher illustrativer Dienstbarkeit; daher bedarf es eigentlich einer Rechtfertigung, wenn ich jetzt hier in Rom an dieser Stelle und vor diesem kunstverständigen Publikum von *Astrologie*, der gefährlichen Feindin freien Kunstschaffens und von ihrer Bedeutung für die Stilentwicklung der italienischen Malerei zu sprechen unternehme.

Ich hoffe, dass eine solche Rechtfertigung im Laufe des Vortrages von dem Probleme selbst übernommen werden wird, das mich durch seine eigentümlich komplizierte Natur — zunächst durchaus gegen meine, anfänglich auf schönere Dinge gerichtete Neigung — in die halbdunkeln Regionen des Gestirnaberglaubens abkommandierte.

Dieses Problem heisst: Was bedeutet der Einfluss der Antike für die künstlerische Kultur der Frührenaissance?

it became clear to me that the structural complexity of an art historical paper is very different from and probably much higher than a one from text based disciplines, since references to images are mostly implicit. External references to text could be done explicitly by cross references or footnotes. References to image details could only be done implicitly, using ekphrasis, known also as a literary form.

So I tried to understand what he might have pointed at using his plates and partly rebuilt it with our solution to the pointing-and-addressing-problem in the internet that we call HyperImage and in its present form Meta-Image.

www.hyperimage.eu
www.meta-image.de

In the process of doing so it appeared to me that when finding and interlinking image material supporting his argument his thought became very convincing indeed, while, when the material was based on textual heritage, the Warburgian arguments turned out to be not as convincing, even almost spurious. Moving from literary to scholarly forms puts texts to a harsh test.

Kristen Lippincott called his method "visionary" in the sense that it was based on vision, that was very true but sometimes scientifically unsound. Warburg was right in his conclusions but wrong in his proofs, at least when reasoning about the text traditions he insinuated.[9] Gombrich even wrote: "In that theory, the wish was father to the thought; but Saxl told me that he found it impossible to convice Warburg of his error."[10]

The paper is called "Italienische Kunst und internationale Astrologie im Palazzo Schifanoja zu Ferrara." In english "Italian art and international astrology in the Palazzo Schifanoia in Ferrara." The occasion for the paper was an image riddle, that is, to find the iconology of a certain figure, a black man, girdled with a rope:

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[9] Kristen Lippincott: Urania redux: An overview of Aby Warburg's writings on art and astrology' in Art History as Cultural History: Warburg's Projects, ed. R. Woodfield, Amsterdam 2001, pp. 151-82.
[10] E. H. Gombrich: Relativism in the Humanities: The Debate about Human Nature. In Topics of our Time. Twentieth-centuriy Issues in Learning and in Art, London 1991, p. 52. After Lippincott 2001, p. 164.

http://www2.leuphana.de/meta-image/Anleitungen.html

The answer Warburg finds is: it is the antique Perseus:



Warburg argues by following a long an windy road from antique greece through egypt, arabia, india, germany, france, spain, arriving at italy.

You can follow the details by navigating to

http://hyperimage.leuphana.de/warnke/MI_Schifanoia/

Using plate A as start with the map that has been prepared for his purposes, the evidences look like this:

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[11] Marco Bertozzi: La tirannia degli astri. Gli affreschi astrologici di Palazzo Schifanoia, Livorno 1999, Tf. 5. Aus prometheus-bildarchiv.de.
[12] Mnemosyne (Bilderatlas, Fotos der Tafeln) [Gesamtansicht, Tafel 2]. London, The Warburg Institute Archive. Aus prometheus-bildarchiv.de.

http://www2.leuphana.de/meta-image/Anleitungen.html
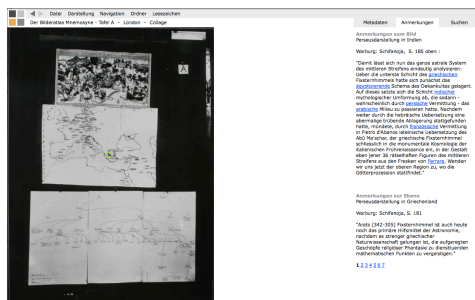
we arrive at all locations Warburg proposes as stations for Perseus' journey:
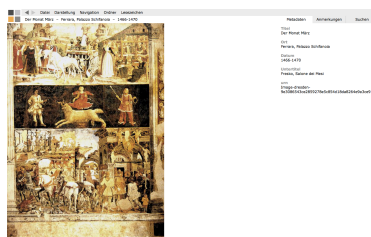


Assembling material from the image repository we used, prometheus, the distributed image archive for teaching and research, particular arguments gain really big momentum. E. g. the one that traces down the Schifanoia iconology to a certain author. There he talks about the girdle plate of somebody that must be goddess Venus, because of the figures given right at the girdle. The print edition leaves the reader clueless,



not so a linked image in high resolution[13] ti which the palazzo affrescoes themselved lead:

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[13] Image-dresden-c99cfa3dcf284f36f2e042e283fce8af453773a0 prometheus-bildarchiv.de

http://www2.leuphana.de/meta-image/Anleitungen.html

This shows not only the necessity of very high resolution images but also the need of dense interlinking of motifs.

All these interlinkages are all but obvious in Warburgs text. What at a first glance looked quite straightforward to me as scholarly paper turned out to be complex to a very high degree. Whether everything is scientifically sound could only be judged when somebody took the burden to collect everything that is claimed to be of importance by Warburg himself, as did Kristen Lippincott, finding that he is right in principle but wrong at a level of precise literary geneology. In a sense art history with a publication practise as that of Warburg has in parts still to undergo the transition to a linearly ordered argument as McLuhan[14] or Roland Barthes[15] described it as triggered by the book technology. The Warburg plates and his use of images as arguments deviate quite a bit from the orderly lanes of a strict logical argumentation in a book tradition.

But maybe such a purgation will never happen, should not happen, since images are analogue and books and the internet are digital.[16] Maybe a new type of scholarship yields a new form of academic argumentation altogether, even as sound as in book culture, but with new ways of proofs based on images and their relationships.

We'll see.

Some last words about the architecture of our system:

To finally show the interlinked motif nets you first have to invoke an editor with which to do the linking.

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[14] McLuhan, Herbert Marshall: Die magischen Kanäle/Amann, Meinrad (Übers.). Düsseldorf: ECON, 1992.
[15] Barthes, Roland: Der Tod des Autors. in: Texte zur Theorie der Autorschaft, 2000, S. 185-193.
[16] Warnke, Martin: Bildersuche. In: Zeitschrift für Medienwissenschaft, ISSN 1869-1722 1 (2009), 1, S. 28-37.

http://www2.leuphana.de/meta-image/Anleitungen.html

The images are fetched out of the prometheus image archive. In future set-
tings theses could be other repositories, the own hard drive or the inter-
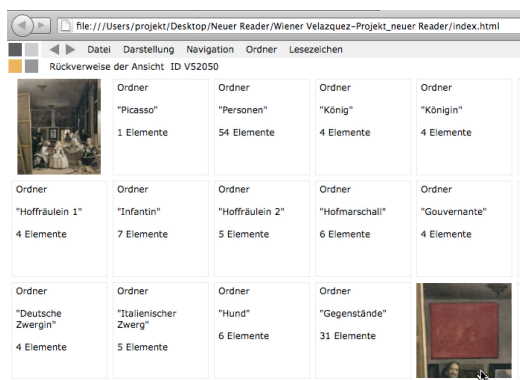net. But now it is prometheus:



The editor fills a database with the images, the metadata and, most import-
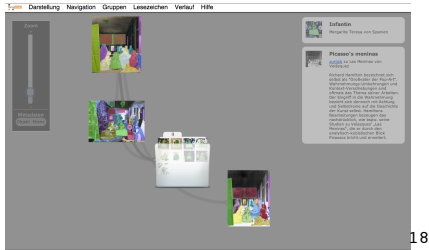antly, with the linking information.

An export yields the web readable reader version:
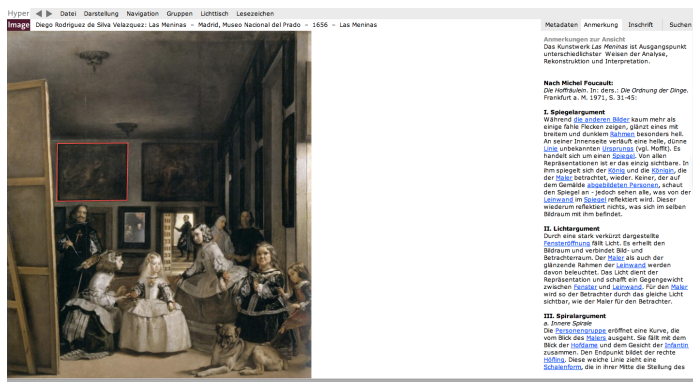


It contains also the index of the linking, that is, the backlinks:



We also built a newer version of the reader with which to explore the whole
network:

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http://www2.leuphana.de/meta-image/Anleitungen.html

So the network of references itself could become the very item under investigation.

I dare to presume that Warburg would have liked technologies like these.

I would like to thank Elena Bösenberg, Rebecca von Fehrentheil and Gesa Woltjen, the grouop of students with which I did that particular investigation, for their work on our Warburg prototype and for all the inspirations!

Thank you very much!

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